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ABSTRACT

Governors and other state policymakers are turning to volunteer reading tutoring programs to improve children's reading ability. The Committee for Economic Development, a nonpartisan organization of business leaders and educators, reports a steady rise in the number of businesses that are volunteering personnel to participate in business-school partnerships across the nation. Quality volunteer tutoring reading programs work. Research shows that children participating in these programs achieve academic gains and increase their self- confidence. Quality programs have four elements: (1) training for volunteers; (2) assessment-based instruction; (3) structured reading sessions; and (4) an onsite coordinator. Governors concerned about improving literacy skills in all children may want to consider the following: encouraging the development of research-proven volunteer programs; including the four principles mentioned above; and focusing on early intervention. Research from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that early intervention can reduce the percentage of children with reading deficits from the current 20% to 25% to 5% or fewer. (NKA)

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Issue Brief

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NGA Center for BEST PRACTICES

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Improving Children's Reading Ability Through Volunteer Reading Tutoring Programs*

Summary

Governors and other state policymakers are turning to volunteer reading tutoring programs to improve children's reading ability. The Committee for Economic Development, a nonpartisan organization of business leaders and educators, reports a steady rise in the number of businesses that are volunteering personnel to participate in business-school partnerships across the nation.[i]

Quality volunteer tutoring reading programs work. Research shows that children participating in these programs achieve academic gains and increase their self-confidence.[ii] Quality programs have four elements.

1. **Training for volunteers.** As children's reading progresses during the school year, volunteers need to learn new techniques and model new strategies for teaching more complex skills.
2. **Assessment-based instruction.** In a reading program, frequent assessment focuses tutor's efforts on effective lessons.
3. **Structured reading sessions.** In April 2000, the National Reading Panel identified fluency (rereading familiar material), alphabetics (phonemic awareness and phonics), and comprehension (background knowledge and strategies) as three components of learning to read.[iii]
4. **An onsite coordinator.** This person provides volunteer tutors with a basic understanding of the reading process and gives them feedback on their tutoring efforts.

Governors concerned about improving literacy skills in all children may want to consider encouraging the development of research-proven volunteer programs; inclusion of the four principles mentioned in this brief; and focus on early intervention because research from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that early intervention can reduce the percentage of children with reading deficits from the current 20 to 25 percent to 5 percent or fewer.

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The Need for Quality Volunteer Reading Tutoring Programs

The nation has not yet succeeded in ensuring that all children are good readers by the time they leave the primary grades. Even with changing approaches in curriculum and instruction and the emphasis on improving student achievement, the percentage of children who read well has not improved substantially for more than 25 years.[iv] The 1998 National Research Council report on reading estimates that one in five children has difficulty learning to read.[v] Nearly two-thirds of our nation's poorest fourth-grade readers failed to read at a "basic" level on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress. Heightening the concerns raised by these statistics is the longitudinal research suggesting that students who are poor readers at the end of first grade are likely to remain poor readers by the end of fourth grade and even into adulthood.

One approach to improve children's reading ability is to develop volunteer programs that aim to instill a love of books and learning in disadvantaged children. A recent study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Planning and Evaluation Services found that in one such program:[vi]

- 25 percent of participants in a lunchtime volunteer reading program who were reading below grade level improved their academic performance, compared with 12 percent of students who were not in the program;
- 16 percent of poor readers in the program "improved" or "very much improved" their classroom behavior, in contrast to only 3 percent of students who were not in the program; and
- 55 percent of poor readers in the program "always" or "often" enjoyed reading, compared with 31 percent of the control group students.

Essential Elements of Effective Volunteer Reading Tutoring Programs

Four elements are common to effective volunteer reading tutoring programs.

- ***Training for Volunteers.*** The training and close supervision of volunteer tutors are essential to the success of volunteer reading tutoring programs. Quality training programs involve modeling of best practices before, during, and after the scheduled tutoring sessions for volunteers. With as little as an hour or two of training, volunteers in **Oregon**'s SMART program made a considerable difference. Students enrolled in the program read more fluently on the state's reading benchmark program than peers not in the program.[vii] After the volunteer tutors conduct a lesson designed by the onsite coordinator, they should provide the onsite coordinator with written and oral feedback on the implementation of the lesson plan for ongoing program improvement.

> In 1998, Governor Michael O. Leavitt launched **Utah** Reads, a literacy campaign to ensure that all Utah students are reading at grade level by the end of the third grade. Utah Reads trains staff and elementary school principals in early literacy and research-based classroom practices.
>
> Utah Reads also supports a community volunteer tutoring program that aims to have 12,000 struggling readers reading at or above grade level by the end of third grade. Utah communities are identifying volunteers and training them to tutor children in local schools. In some schools, older students tutor younger children.

- ***Assessment-Based Instruction.*** Assessment and evaluation guide the implementation and fine-tuning of quality volunteer reading tutoring programs. Children are assessed at the outset of the program to identify individual literacy needs and periodically throughout the school year to adjust the pace and content of instruction. At the end of the program, outcome measures, including the reading of graded texts, are used to gauge progress in reading achievement and to evaluate program effectiveness. All instruction should be driven by student assessment and should be on the child's instructional level.
- ***Structured Reading Sessions.*** Quality volunteer reading tutoring programs offer well-structured tutoring sessions that extend the learning time for children who need more intensive instruction.

OhioReads is Governor Bob Taft's major education initiative to improve the reading skills of students in kindergarten through fourth grade so they can pass the fourth-grade reading proficiency test. At the governor's urging, 20,000 volunteer tutors have joined this initiative including senior citizens, parents, members of the general community and people from Ohio businesses, service organizations, and colleges and universities.
Bowling Green University, one of the OhioReads projects, has tapped into the governor's initiative and developed a one–credit hour class that has recruited 117 college students who are currently tutoring more than 200 children in six Toledo public schools. Students enrolled in the class participate in a three-week training class, where they learn about diversity, reading skills, reading models, proficiency tests, and working with children.

The structure of the lesson plan may vary across programs. However, according to a 2000 National Reading Panel report, all lesson plans should contain a balance of reading for fluency, alphabetics, and comprehension.[viii]

Practice in *reading for fluency* should progress through a sequence of books that are carefully leveled by gradations of difficulty. Repeated reading of familiar text cultivates fluent word recognition and improved comprehension. *Alphabetics* refers to two critical components of learning to read an alphabetic writing system: teaching children to focus on and manipulate units of sound comprising spoken words and syllables (phonemic awareness); and teaching letters and letter-sound correspondences and their use in spelling and reading (phonics). Reading *comprehension* can be improved by teaching students to use specific strategies when encountering difficult text. Effective volunteer reading tutoring programs involve different reading comprehension activities to help students recall, answer questions, and summarize what they have read.

- ***Onsite Coordinator.*** An onsite coordinator can make a real difference in the success of a volunteer program by assisting volunteers in developing research-based lessons. This reading specialist is responsible for imparting knowledge

The **Washington** Reading Corps, supported by Governor Gary Locke, is a group of 200 schools statewide committed to helping struggling readers in kindergarten through sixth grade. Teachers, school staff, and volunteers team up to form a large corps of concerned citizens who can give children the help they need to learn to read.

Each of the Washington Reading Corps sites has a designated certified staff member who oversees volunteers as well as program management, initial and cumulative assessment of students, data collection and reporting, and verification of hours. The site manager also supervises volunteers and trains them on how to effectively tutor students.

about the teaching of reading, assessing individual children for specific literacy needs, designing individualized lesson plans, providing ongoing training through hands-on demonstrations and verbal guidance, and coordinating with classroom teachers and monitoring student progress.

Next Steps

To ensure the success of volunteer reading tutoring programs, state policymakers may want to take the following steps.

- ***Require Training for all Volunteers.*** The success of a volunteer reading tutoring program rides on the energy, abilities, and commitment of its volunteer tutors. However, enthusiasm may not be enough to ensure program success. Without strong preservice preparation for volunteers, ongoing training and support, and guidance and feedback from the onsite coordinator, volunteers are left to rely on their own capabilities. A good tutor-training program capitalizes on the initial energy volunteers bring and refines it into a professional base of knowledge and tutoring skills.
- ***Evaluate Programs for Effectiveness.*** Many current volunteer program lack data to determine their lasting impact on student reading achievement. As policymakers begin to develop or consider expanding volunteer reading tutoring programs they may want to examine what current research identifies as best practices to emulate.
- ***Invest in Coordinated Leadership.*** Every volunteer program needs a strong vision and coordinated leadership. The onsite coordinator plays several key roles, including identifying children for tutoring, matching tutors with children, testing children's skills, periodically evaluating program effectiveness, and seeking volunteer feedback. Coordinators also are responsible for modeling tutoring techniques, preparing lessons or assisting experienced tutors in lesson planning, and observing lessons.

Virginia's Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI) is an example of a governor-initiated, legislated action to reduce the number of children with reading problems through early detection and intervention. To date, EIRI has served kindergarteners and first graders recently it expanded to include students in second and third grade. The Virginia Department of Education provides a screening tool to all participating school divisions to identify students who could benefit from additional literacy instruction, and incentive funds are made available to provide additional instruction for at-risk students. Intervention initiatives include after school and summer tutorials, and other locally designed reading programs.

- ***Commit to Early Interventions.*** Research funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) demonstrates that most reading problems can be prevented when precursors are diagnosed early and intervention services are implemented immediately. Educators can provide remediation for older children and adults, but the cost of such remediation is higher when compared with early intervention. NICHD also concludes that early intervention can reduce the percentage of children with reading deficits from the current 20 percent to 25 percent to 5 percent or fewer.

Endnotes

[i] Committee for Economic Development, "The Unfinished Agenda: A New Vision for Child Development and Education" (1991), available at < http://www.ced.org/pubs/pubsalpha.htm>.

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[viii] Ibid.

*This *Issue Brief* was written by Marcia Invernizzi of the University of Virginia's McGuffey Reading Center and Mark Ouellette of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.